

Another Bump in the Road: Myanmar's Fledgling Fight for Democracy

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On November 8th 2015, Myanmar is heading to the polls in what is largely pitched as the most free and fair elections of their recent history. In a climate of military political dominance, [severe human rights abuses](#) and historically insular foreign policies, analysts across the world will be paying close attention to the forthcoming election season. The exclusion of dozens of candidates from the final election candidate list represents the latest in an ongoing series of events suggestive of the endemic struggle for democracy.

Since the 1962 coup d'état, Myanmar has been under the political dominance of the army elites, who stand accused of gross abuses of human rights, religious intolerance and media suppression. Their suppressive rule is symbolized by the house arrest of the leader of the opposition, Nobel Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, who has led the fight for democracy. A general election in 2011 resulted in the dissolution of the military junta and the election of a nominally civilian government, headed by the former military commander, Thein Sein.

President Sein has overseen surprisingly progressive economic, administrative and political reforms, and with the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest, her National League for Democracy (NLD) has begun to formally re-engage in national politics. 2012 saw both a landmark victory for the NLD in by-elections (including Suu Kyi herself taking a seat in Naypyidaw's parliament), the suspension of non-military sanctions against Myanmar by the EU, and the [first visit to Myanmar by a serving US president](#), during which Barack Obama described Burma's road to democracy as a 'remarkable journey'. All seemed bright for the democratic transition.

As the country prepares for general elections this year, the climate of reformation appears altogether restrained. Indeed, the season has got off to a dramatic start: a midnight raid at the headquarters of the governing military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) saw the forceful removal of Thura U Shwe Mann as the

party's chairman. Shwe Mann is thought to have made conservative military forces uncomfortable with his allegiance with Aung San Suu Kyi, and was seen as a prime candidate for presidency. Mann was also supportive of pushing through constitutional changes that would reduce the power of the military (currently, [non-elected military officials make up 25% of the parliament](#), effectively giving them a military veto to constitutional changes). Despite winning the majority of votes, key constitutional change, which went to MPs votes in August, [did not exceed the required benchmark](#) (tellingly, 75%+1) required to pass. This is a damning blow to hopes of democracy in Myanmar.

Despite affirmation from the Myanmar Government that the elections will be free and fair, their substance should be significantly called in to question with the [release of the final list of candidates up for election](#) this week. Almost 100 candidates, the majority of which are Muslim, have been disqualified from participating in the November 8th polls. This includes 15 out of 18 candidates from the Democracy and Human Rights Party, a Muslim majority party running for power in the Rakhine state. The Rakhine state sits on Myanmar's western coast and has come to international media attention due to the persecution and human rights abuses being imposed upon the Rohingya Muslim population. The Myanmar Government, based on the [1982 Citizenship Law](#), refuse the Rohingya population citizenship, leaving them essentially stateless and [forcing many to flee by boat](#). As Barack Obama has declared, Myanmar needs to take this issue seriously in order to be successful in its transition to democracy.

There are significant warning signs to the international community that the ruling Myanmar military elite are unwilling to relinquish their rule over Myanmar's political system. Commentators on the whole have been too optimistic in their analyses of Myanmar's journey post-military rule, assuming a self-propagating linear progression towards democracy. This process is by no means irreversible. We must watch the ensuing elections with trepidation: undoubtedly, Myanmar has made distinct progress, but the military will not let go easily.